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# The Lab Report, volume 01, issue 04

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Playwright's Lab  
at Hollins University

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# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 01, Issue 04 (September, 2007)

## The First Chapter: Coming to Jamestown



**Young Audiences of Virginia** commissioned MFA Program Director Todd Ristau last year to research, write, produce, and direct a new play for elementary students about the Jamestown Colony. The commission was designed to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the colony's founding.

The commission parameters were daunting. The play had to be appropriate to 1st through 5th grades, incorporate

materials that reflected the Virginia Standards of Learning curriculum for this period of history, be as historically accurate as possible, and incorporate opportunities for audience participation. The entire play could be acted by no more than four players, and the production needed to be able to tour easily as it was envisioned that the play would be performed in at least one elementary school in every county in Virginia.

### Student Spotlight: Kenley Smith

**Kenley Smith** is a 1982 graduate of the Hollins Master of Arts program in English and Creative Writing. His interest in theatre arose from attending and then regularly participating in No Shame Theatre here in Roanoke. After being asked to join the acting company for *The First Chapter: Coming to Jamestown*, he made the decision to return to Hollins as an MFA candidate in Playwriting.

"In crafting more than thirty No Shame pieces, in the performances, I discovered a creative fire that I hadn't felt

for 25 years," Kenley says of his motivation to write plays.

Ken continued, "I once asked my spiritual teacher a fairly banal question—should I buy a motorcycle? Without hesitation he asked me in return—will it bring you joy? I bought the bike, and sure enough, it did. Now I ask myself the same question. The answer comes hard, fast, and clear. Writing gives me life, perhaps quite literally. And in life, we always have the choice to find joy. Now that I have my eye on it, I'm not letting it out of my sight."

Todd sought out the help of John Shirley, who had recently graduated from the Mary Baldwin MFA program in Renaissance Studies. Together they crafted a script that met all the criteria and would still entertain the kids. Todd purchased costumes, and designed the set, which was constructed by John Forsman, Technical Director of Hollins Theatre.

The actors were drawn from No Shame Theatre performers. Though various members have rotated in and out of the company as it toured Virginia schools, Todd has always played the role of William, one of the colonists and Kenley Smith (MFA playwright), has also been a core company member. Ken plays a variety of roles in the show, including Christopher Newport.

Plans are underway for a second company, based out of Virginia Beach, to begin touring the in 2008.

For more information, visit:

<http://www.yav.org/history.html>



[www.myspace.com/kenley\\_smith](http://www.myspace.com/kenley_smith)

# The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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## Guest Profile: Mac Wellman



**Mac Wellman** is one of the most important names in American theatre. He has published novels, books of poems, and edited several anthologies. He has received fellowships from the NEA and NYFA, and from the Rockefeller, McNight, and Guggenheim foundations. He's won many important awards, several Obies, including the 2003 Obie for Lifetime Achievement. Mac is currently the Donald I. Fine Professor of Play Writing at Brooklyn College in New York.

We were thrilled when Mac agreed to come to Hollins during our inaugural summer for an entire week of workshops, talks, and informal discussions with our MFA students.

We had a chance to ask him some questions. Here are some of the answers:

***What do you think an audience needs in order to find your work accessible?***

Well, their wits, presumably. I think it is up to the artist to let his or her writing take him or her wherever it will. You will end up with the audience you deserve, not the audience you

were building for yourself. This means that there will be surprises in your life. What's accessible for one person is not accessible for another. There are plenty of things we understand that we could never explain. So, all I want to do is make theatre as interesting as life is, which it seems to me, is rational.

***Then how do you attract an audience?***

Well, it may not attract anybody at all. I mean, that's also a possibility. Or it may just come at the wrong time. When Beethoven composed the Hammerklavier Sonata there wasn't a piano in the world it could be played on. I think you have to follow your own nature and that is different for every person. There are all different kinds of playwrights.

***Do you see an inherent conflict between the dramaturg and the playwright?***

My disappointment with dramaturgy is that it was introduced in this country not that long ago with the end of having somebody at the Artistic Director's elbow encouraging him take risks and do new and exciting work. This did not happen. They turned into, like, court jesters. The traditional function of dramaturgs in Europe is to do research, I think they still do that, but the effort to push American theatre in a more interesting direction has been largely a failure. And I think even that the people who invented dramaturgy, like Mark Bly, Ann Cattaneo and Oscar Eustis, would have to admit that. Can they help you with your play? Sure. Do they always? No. I think it is easy

to get confused in rewriting a play. Usually, in rehearsal, you're writing out of fear and dread. No one is going to say, "Can you make that any crazier? Why don't you have a bunch of monkeys run on stage and throw shit at the audience? Could you do that? You know, something crazy?"

No one is going to say that. They will say things like, "Where's the warmth?" But, it's as Romulus Linney said, "There are three basic human instincts: Food, shelter, and re-writing other people's plays." Which, I think, is true. But, I actually get along well with dramaturgs. I think they are maligned. The problem is with the theatre, it's not their problem. I could tell you what the problem is, but it's in my novel, so you can read it there.

***What is your definition of theatre? Do you think there are any restrictions?***

Oh, sure, but I think that's too big a question. I mean, theatre happens in a space. And it happens in four dimensional states. And hopefully you make something that is interesting and that elucidates something for somebody. Everything's

experimental. Life is an experiment...that ends badly. All theatre is an experiment. I like the word experiment...for people who hate theatre. I think it's a good word. Too often people are overly concerned with structure...and what I call structure is something in a play that reminds us of some other play. I'm more interested in something I call texture.

***What do you look for in a playwriting student or student production?***

I don't have any capacity to produce my student's plays. On the whole, I'm more interested in connecting my students with actual theatres that will produce them. The other thing that I encourage a lot is that they start their own theatre companies.

I'm looking for playwrights who are very serious. I don't care about the people who are careerists, who have a play that's good that they want to be done in every regional theatre in the country. I'm interested in people who are sort of fanatics, with a chip on their shoulder, and who have a real interest in something that they can't do in any other way.



**Mac Wellman with Playwright's Lab members before No Shame Theatre. At Mac's table are Kenley Smith and Joshua Graves. Sunny daSilva, Keith Bridges, Toby Thelin, Krista Knutsen, and Maura Campbell adjacent.**



## [www.myspace.com/hollinsplaywrightslab](http://www.myspace.com/hollinsplaywrightslab)

**The Playwright's Lab at Hollins University** has a MySpace page.

"Just like everybody else," you say.

Maybe, but if you go to the URL above, you'll find the most up to the minute information available on this exciting new program, its students, faculty and guest artists.

You'll see photographs taken during the summer sessions, and be able to watch video interviews with the people who make this program one of the best places to study playwriting in the country.

There is a blog feature where you will find postings about student accomplishments,

awards, productions, and readings. You'll also be able to post your own comments and questions about the program.

Frequent postings update playwrights about submission and contest opportunities, scholarship and grant possibilities, and other useful information. You'll also find articles of interest to emerging dramatists, such as submission tips from literary managers and dramaturgs.

There are links to the MySpace pages of many of our students, faculty, and guest artists in the friends section. These will take you to the MySpace pages of an ever growing network of theatres and theatre people

who are dedicated to the development, production, and presentation of new plays.

Lastly, the calendar feature lets everyone know about events sponsored by the Playwright's Lab that are happening on campus, in the local community, and beyond.

For years now, MySpace has been a popular social networking site, but arts organizations have embraced it as an effective means of communicating their mission and finding interested and supportive audience members.

We've found it to be tremendously helpful in connecting our program with

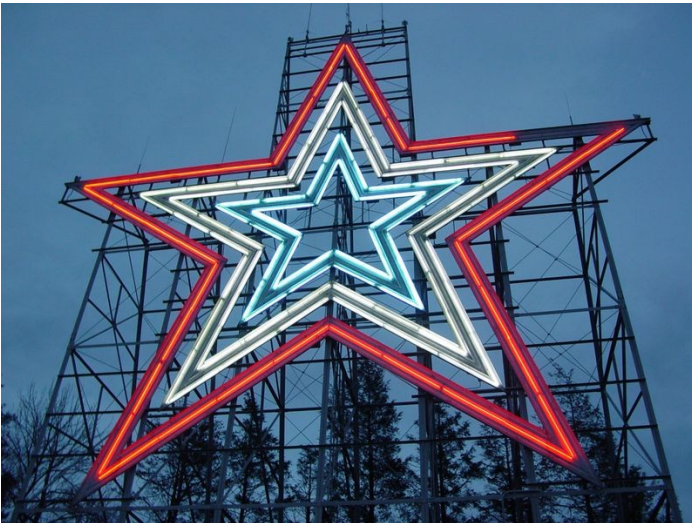
other schools and organizations that have new works as an important part of their mission. In a very short time, this useful website has allowed us to begin building a genuine network through which we can find performance opportunities for our students.

MySpace has helped us establish our name, and allowed that name to become very well recognized among theatre professionals and prospective students alike.

Come visit us on the web and ask to be our friend—we'd love to add you to our network.



## Area Highlight: The Mill Mountain Star



**The Roanoke Star:** what locals brag about as being the world's largest free standing man-made neon star—don't ask about the neon stars that are not man-made.

The star on Mill Mountain is the reason Roanoke is called the Star City. It was erected in 1949 by the Roanoke Merchants Association and "lit"

for the first time by A.R. Minton on November 23rd of that year.

Originally, the star was all white, but for the bicentennial celebration in 1976, the design was changed to red, white, and blue. Occasionally events are commemorated by changing the color combination. For example, after the Virginia Tech shootings the star was solid

white again for a period. When there is a traffic fatality on 581 only the red portion of the star is illuminated.

The Mill Mountain Star is 88.5 feet tall with 2,000 feet of neon tubing, requiring 17,500 watts of power. The tubes were built by Roy C. Kinsey of the Kinsey Sign Company. Robert L. Little, Structural Engineer for Roanoke Iron & Bridge Works at the time, helped with the steel structure to which the tubes were affixed.

You can't miss it. They say on a clear night you can see the star from 65 miles away. But, if you didn't want to simply wander towards it like the three wise men of yore, the physical address is 210 Reserve Ave., Roanoke, VA

From 581, take exit 6, and turn right onto Elm Avenue. At the 2nd light, turn left onto Jefferson Street and left again at the 4th light onto Walnut Avenue. From there just keep driving to the sign indicating that you turn right

to enter Mill Mountain Park. Then proceed to the top of the mountain. The star is turned on at 9PM and off at midnight.

There's a great observation deck up there with a breathtaking panoramic view of the Star City. Bring a camera—or you'll wish that you had. There is also a zoo. The top of Mill Mountain was also home to Mill Mountain Theatre before the original structure burned down and the theatre found new homes in Grandin Theatre and then Center in the Square.

(a tip of the hat to Wikipedia on this one!)

The Roanoke Star, photographed by Ben Schumin, April 7, 2005.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Roanoke\\_star.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Roanoke_star.jpg)

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## Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at [www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting](http://www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting) for more information.

Check out our MySpace page!  
<http://www.myspace.com/hollinsplaywrightslab>

### From the Director: Submission Tip #2

In addition to my role as Program Director, I am also the Literary Associate at a professional theatre that has an open submission policy. This means I read (and reject) a lot of plays sent by hopeful playwrights. For the next few issues, I'm going to be presenting some tips to take some of the mystery (and the agony) out of the submission process.

#### Put your correct contact information on the front page of the script.

This seems obvious, doesn't it?

But, believe it or not, I get one or two scripts a year with no return envelope, no contact info on the cover page, and no letter with a return address.

You say, "But I have my return address on the envelope I sent it in!"

Don't count on the hands of many readers passing your script around a theatre to keep the envelope it came in (or even the cover letter) attached to it.

If the script doesn't have your contact information on the cover, I have to assume you aren't that interested in hearing back from us. Theatres are busy places and the people in the literary office don't have time to track you down.

Response times can take 6 months or more, but rarely so long that a forwarding order has expired...and yet, I also get scripts back in the mail because the person doesn't live at the address they provided.

When planning your submissions, take a moment to find out what the response time is at the theatre and add a couple of months to that. If you're going to be moving before that time expires, add the note on your cover page that after a specific date, a new address will be correct...and include that new address!

If you do move unexpectedly or don't know where you might be moving to, be sure that you file a forwarding order so that your scripts and responses will find you.

If you can afford it, consider getting a post office box dedicated to your playwriting correspondence. This will provide a stable and

permanent address for you and is a legitimate expense you can deduct against your playwriting income at tax time.



**Todd Ristau, Director  
Playwright's Lab at Hollins  
University**